

Choice Literature.

BY A WAY SHE KNEW NOT.

The Story of Allison Bain.

BY MARGARET M. ROBERTSON.

CHAPTER XXVII.

God liveth ever
Wherefore, all, despair thou never

Brownrig was better in mind and in body than when Allison first came, but he was far from strong. His mind was far from clear, and it was not easy for him "to put this and that together," in a way to satisfy himself, when the doctor went away. He was already "muddled," as he called it, and he did the best thing he could have done in the circumstances, he shut his eyes and fell asleep.

Before he woke Allison came in, and when he looked up, he saw her sitting with her work on her lap, and yesterday's newspaper in her hand, reading and smiling to herself as she read.

"Weel, what's the news the day?" said he.

Allison did not start or show the surprise she felt at being thus addressed.

"Will I read it to you?" she asked.

She read about the markets and the news of the day, but whether he were getting the good of it all or not, she could not say. When she thought she had read enough, she laid down the paper and took up her work as usual.

That was the beginning. All the days passed like this day for a while, except that a book took the place of a newspaper sometimes. And by and by, the best of books had a minute or two given to it—rarely more than a minute or two. Brownrig listened to that as he listened to the rest, willingly, and sometimes with interest, when she chanced to light on a part which had not been quite forgotten in the long careless years which had passed since the time his dead mother used to read it with him and his little sisters, when they were children at home. When he looked interested, or made a remark on any part of what she read, Allison went over it again, and now and then took courage to speak a word or two of him who "bore our griefs and carried our sorrows," and who died that we might live. He listened always in silence. Whether he was ever moved by the words could not be told, for he gave no sign.

While all this went on, summer was passing, and the dull November days were drawing near. Allison had her own thoughts, and some of them were troubled thoughts enough. But she waited, always patiently, if not always hopefully; and even at the worst, when she had little to cheer her, and when she dared not look forward to what the future might hold for her, she still strove to live day by day, and hour by hour, waiting to learn God's will, whatever it might be.

Little change came to the sick man as far as Allison could judge, or any one else. Was he getting better? If so, his progress toward health was more slowly made than had been hoped. At times he was restless and irritable, and spared neither nurse nor doctor which was taken as a good sign by some who were looking on. But for the most part he was quiet enough, taking little heed of the passing hours.

When Mr. Rainy came to speak to him on any matter of business, he seemed to rouse himself, and gave tokens of a clear mind and a good memory with regard to those matters which were put before him, whether they pertained to his own private business, or to that of the estate of Blackhills. But of his own accord he rarely alluded to business of any kind, and seemed, for the most part, forgetful of all that had hitherto filled his life. His friends came to see him now and then, and while any one was with him he seemed moved to a certain interest in what they had to tell, in the news of the town, or in the events which were taking place in the world beyond it, but his interest ceased when his visitor left him.

Except from weariness, and restlessness, and inability to move, he suffered little, and he had been so often told that the best hope for him, the only chance for restoration to a measure of health in the future, lay in implicit obedience to all that doctor and nurse required of him, that he learned the lesson at last, and was obedient and patient to a degree that might well surprise those who knew him best.

It did not always come easy to him, this patience and obedience. There were times when he broke bounds, and complained, and threatened, and even swore at his man Dickson, nor did Allison herself escape from the hearing of bitter words. But Dickson took it calmly, and bore it as part of his duty and his day's work.

"I'm weel used with it," said he. "His hard words maybe ease him, poor man, and they do me nae ill."

And they did Allison "no ill" in one way. She was too sorry for him to be angry on her own account, and listened in silence. Or, if he forgot himself altogether and gave her many of them, she rose quietly and went out of the room. She expected no apology when she returned, and none was ever offered, and his ill words made her none the less patient with him, and none the less ready at all times to do faithfully the duties which she had undertaken of her own free will.

But they made her unhappy many a time. For what evidence had she that her sacrifice was accepted? Had she been presumptuous in her desires and hopes that she might be permitted to do some good to this man, who had done her so much evil? Had she taken up this work too lightly in her own strength which was weakness in her own wisdom which was folly? Had she been unwise in coming, or wilful in staying? Or was it that she was not fit to be used as an instrument in God's hand to help this man, because she also had done wrong? She wearied herself with these thoughts, telling herself that her sacrifice had been in vain, and her efforts and her prayers all alike in vain.

For she saw no token that this man's heart had been touched by the discipline through which he had passed, or that any word or effort of hers had availed to move him or to make him see his need of higher help than hers. So she grew discouraged now and then, and shrunk from his anger and his "ill words" as from a blow. Still she said to herself:

"There is no turning back now. I must have patience and wait."

She had less cause for discouragement than she supposed.

For Brownrig did, now and then, take to heart a gently spoken word of hers; and the words of the book which his mother had loved, and which brought back to him the sound of her voice and the smile in her kind eyes, were not heard altogether in vain. He had his own thoughts about them, and about Allison herself, and at last his thoughts took this turn, and clung to him persistently.

"Either she is willing to forgive me the wrong which she believes I did her, or else she thinks that I am going to die."

Dickson did not have an easy time on the morning when this thought came first to his master. When Allison came in she had utter silence for a while. Brownrig took no notice of the newspaper in her hand, and looked away when she took up the Book and slowly turned the leaves. But that had happened before, and Allison read on a few verses about the ruler who came to Jesus by night, and who, wondering, said, "How can a man be born when he is old?"

"Ay! how indeed?" muttered Brownrig. "Born again. Ah! if that might be! If a man could have a second chance!"

And then his thoughts went back to the days of his youth, and he asked himself when and where he had taken the first step aside from the right way, and how it came about that, having had his mother for the first thirteen years of his life he should have forgotten her. No, he had not forgotten her, but he had forgotten her teachings and her prayers, and his own promises made to her, that he would ever "hate that which is evil, and cleave to that which is good," and that he would strive so to live and serve God that he might come at last to meet her where she hoped to go. Was it too late now? He sighed, and turned his head uneasily on the pillow. The angry look had gone out of his eyes, and they met Allison's with a question in them. But he did not speak till she said very gently:

"What is it? Can I do anything for you?"

"Has the doctor been saying anything to you of late?" he asked. "Does he think that my time is come, and that I am going to die?"

Allison's face showed only her surprise at the question.

"The doctor has said nothing to me. Are you not so well? Will I send for the doctor?" and she laid her cool fingers on his hand. But he moved it away impatiently.

"What I canna understand is that you should have come at all. You must have thought that I was going to die or you wouldna have come."

"Yes, I thought you might be going to die. I didna think I would have come but for that. I was sorry for you, and I had done wrong, too, in that I hadna withstood you. But I wished to be at peace with you, and I thought that you might be glad that we should forgive one another at the last."

"Forgive—at the last? There's sma' comfort in that, I'm thinking," and not another word was spoken between them that day. And not many were spoken for a good many days after that.

But one morning when Allison had been detained among her "auld wives" a little longer than usual, she came softly into the room, to find, not Dickson, but an old man with clear, keen eyes and soft white hair sitting beside the bed. His hands were clasped together on the top of his staff, and his face, benign and grave, was turned toward the sick man.

"He seems to be asleep," said Allison softly, as she drew near.

"Yes, he seems to be asleep," said the old man; "but I have a message to him from the Master, and I can wait till he wakens. And who may you be? One who comes on an errand of mercy, or I am greatly mistaken."

"I am a nurse here. And—I am—this man's wife."

She said it in a whisper, having had no thought a moment before of ever uttering the words.

"Ay! Ay!" said the old man, in tones which expressed many things—surprise, interest, awakened remembrance. And then Allison turned and met the eyes of her husband.

"It is the minister come to see you," said she, drawing back from his outstretched hand.

"Stay where you are," said he, taking hold of her gown. "Hide still where you are."

"Yes, I will bide. It is Doctor Kirke who has come to see you."

"You have had a long and sore time of trouble and pain," said the minister gravely.

"Yes, but the worst is over now," said Brownrig, his eyes still fixed on Allison's half-averted face.

"Let us hope so," said the old man, solemnly. "If the Lord's dealing has been taken to heart and his lesson learned, the worst is over."

But he had more to say than this. He was by no means sure that in his sense, or in any sense, the worst was over for this man, who had all his life sinned with a high hand, in the sight of his fellow-men, as well as in the sight of his Maker. His heart was full of pity, but he was one of those whose pity inclines them to be faithful rather than tender.

"Man, you have been a great sinner all your days," he said, slowly and solemnly. Many changes passed over the face of Brownrig as the minister went on, but he never removed his eyes from the face of Allison, nor loosened his firm clasp of her hand.

Faithful! Yes, but yet tender. How full of pity and of entreaty was the old man's voice when he spoke of One who, hating sin, yet loves the sinner. One who is slow to anger, full of compassion and of great mercy, not willing that any should perish, but that all, even the worst, should come unto Him and live!

"And, O man! ye need Him no less that you may be going back to your life again. The Lord could do wonderful things for the like of you, if ye would but let Him have His will o' ye. Able! Ay, is He, and willing as able, and surely he has given you a sign. Look at this woman against whom, it is said, ye wofully sinned! If she, who is but a weak and sinful mortal, has forgiven you, and is caring for you, and would save you, how can there be doubt of Him who gave His life a ransom for you?"

A glance at Allison's face stayed his words. Then he knelt down and prayed—not in many words—not as if entreating One offended or angry, but One waiting, looking, listening, loving. One "mighty to save." And then he rose and touched the hand of each, and went silently away.

Had Brownrig fallen asleep? Allison slowly turned her face toward him. He lay with closed eyes, motionless, and there were tears on his cheeks. As Allison tried gently to withdraw her hand from his clasp his eyes opened.

"Is it true, Allie? Have you forgiven me?"

"I—was sorry for you long since, even before you were hurt. I never wished ill to you. I came when I heard that you were like to die, so that we might forgive one another."

Allison had gone almost beyond her power of speech by this time, but he held her fast.

"Oh! Allie, ye micht hae made a good man o' me, if ye had but had the patience and the will to try."

But Allison said:

"No, that could never have been. I wasna good myself, and I was dazed with trouble."

"Ay, poor lassie, ye hae much to forgive. But I will make amends, I will make amends. Yes, in the sight of God and man, I will make full amends."

Allison could bear no more. Where was it all to end? Surely she was in the net now, and is was drawing close upon her, and she could not bear it. For a moment it came into her mind to flee. But the temptation did not linger long, nor did it return.

In his accustomed place Dickson was waiting.

"Your master requires you," said Allison, and then she passed on to her refuge among the auld wives, and pun bodies in the wide ward beyond. But it was not a refuge to-day.

"And how is your patient the day, puir man?" said she who was bowed with rheumatism being "no' fifty yet."

"We heard that the minister had been sent for to see him," said another. "It is to be hoped that he will do him some good."

Allison answered them both quietly. "He is just as usual. Yes, the minister has been there," and moved on to someone else.

It was the hour which she usually spent among 'hem, and she went from one bed to another, saying and doing what was needed for the suffering or fretful poor souls among them, answering kindly and firmly, with never-failing patience, the grateful looks of some, and the dull complaining of others, till the time came which set her free to go her own way again.

She was the better for the hour which she had dreaded when she first came in. She no longer felt the touch of that hot hand on hers, or the gaze of the eager eyes, which she had met with such sinking of heart. She was herself again.

"To think that I should grow faint-hearted this day of all days, when for the first time he seemed to be touched by a good man's words. I should be rejoicing and thankful. And whatever else is true, it is true that he who brought me here, kens the end, though I do not."

And so she went home to her rest, and the next day was like all the days, except that the sick man, as Dickson put it, "wasna sae ill to do wi'." It became evident to both doctor and nurse, that Brownrig had at last taken in the thought that he might be going to die. He said nothing for a while, but he marked their words and watched their ways, and when Dr. Kirke came, which he did every few days, he listened with patience, which grew to pleasure as time went on. When at last he repeated to Dr. Fleming himself, the question which he had put to Allison, the doctor's rather ambiguous answer did not satisfy him.

"I see you have your own thoughts about it," said Brownrig. "I think you are mistaken. I do not mean to die if I can help it. I wish to live, and I mean to live—if such is God's will," he added, after a pause. "I'm no' going to let myself slip out o' life without a struggle for it. I have a strong will, which hasna aye been guided to good ends, ye'll say, and I acknowledge it. But 'all that a man hath will he give for his life,' the Book says. And I will do my best to live."

The doctor said nothing.

"It is not that I'm feared to die. If all is true that Doctor Kirke has been saying to me, why should I fear? 'More willing to forgive, than ye are to be forgiven,' says he. And I can believe it. I do believe it. If Allison Bain can forgive, surely He will not refuse, who is 'merciful and full of compassion.' And I hope—I believe—that I am forgiven."

Looking up, Doctor Fleming saw the tears on the sick man's cheek. That was all he was permitted to say for the time, for his strength was not great though his will was strong. The rest of the day was passed between sleeping and waking, while Allison sat working in silence by the window. But he returned to his declaration in the morning.

"Yes, I mean to live, but for a' that I may as well be prepared for death. And ye'll send Mr. Rainy to me this very day. He must just come while I need him—and when I'm at my best and able for him. I'll die none the sooner for setting all things in order to my mind."

So the next day Mr. Rainy came, and for a good many days, and went through with him many matters of business, which must be attended to whether he lived or died. He was quite fit for it—a little at a time—Mr. Rainy declared. But the doctor wondered that his strength held out through it all. There was no evidence of failure in sense or judgment in all he said or planned, though his memory sometimes was at fault.

There was much to do, and some of it was not of a nature to give either peace or pleasure to the sick man. But it came to an end at last, and there were a few days of quiet till he was rested. Then he began again.

"I may be going to die, or I may be going to live. Who can say? It must be as God wills. But I have settled with myself one thing. Whether I am to live or to die, it is to be in my own house."

This was said to Dickson, who was ready with an answer to please him.

"And the sooner the better, sir, say I. The fine fresh air o' the hills would set you up sooner than a their doctor's bottles is like to do. If it were only May instead of November, I would say the sooner the better."

"And I say the sooner the better at this time. Yes, its late, and its a lang road, and I have little strength to come and go upon. But there are ways o' doing most things when the siller (money) needna be considered, and where there is a good will to do them."

"Ay, sir, that's true. And I daresay the laird micht send his ain carriage, and ye micht tak' twa days to it, or even three."

"No, no. The sooner the journey could be gotten over the better. But that's a good thought o' yours about the laird's carriage. He'll send it fast enough, if I but ask it. But I'm done out now, and I'll need to lie still a while, to be ready and at my best, when the doctor comes."

(To be continued.)